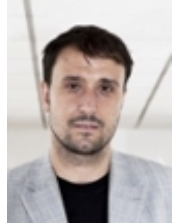


The European Union should step into the debate over Catalan independence

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*On 11 September, a human chain was formed by people in Catalonia to demonstrate support for the territory's independence from Spain. **Joan Costa i Font** writes that Catalan independence is not simply an internal Spanish issue, but has the potential to spill-over into the European arena. He argues that with the Spanish government reluctant to allow either an independence referendum or a constitutional reform, the European Union should now take an active role in the debate.*



The Catalan question has overshadowed modern Spanish politics for more than a century. The latter includes a forty-year dictatorship followed by a 'peculiar' transition to democracy and a subsequent Constitutional settlement in 1978 which most Catalans interpreted as a route to a federal Spain. However, as early as 1981, a failed coup, a list of subsequent recentralisation attempts, cast doubts over any serious federal transition.

Two decades later in 2005, a new [statute of autonomy](#) attained the majority support of both Catalan and Spanish Parliaments, and the democratic legitimacy of a referendum, but it was finally frustrated in 2010 by the ruling of a heavily politicised Constitutional court (today chaired by a militant conservative known by its anti Catalan views). These gave rise to long lasting debate over what can be labelled as the 'law v democracy' dilemma, whereby the constitutional references to both an 'indissoluble unity of Spain' and the need of a 'Spanish-wide referendum' prevail over the people of Catalonia's preferences. As a result, Catalans are trapped within Spain, after the new interpretation of the Constitution after the 2010 ruling.

The federalist majority in Catalonia realised after 2010 that a federal agreement was an impossible mission given the weakness of federalists in mainstream Spain. Perhaps, their view was that only joining those who support a project of secession could either force a federal Constitutional reform or, as a second best deal, create an independent state. This can explain the [huge demonstration](#) in 2012, and the recent massive participation in the [human chain for independence](#) on 11 September, which involved more than 1.5 million participants. Both phenomena express the dissatisfaction about how Spanish politics works, and the hope that a new successful state would do better.

Next steps...

The next steps include an unlikely scenario of a negotiated referendum, even though 45 per cent of Spanish citizens and 80 per cent of Catalans [support it](#). Failing this, a 'tolerated' referendum promoted by the Catalan government could be another alternative solution, but the chances are it will be outlawed by the Spanish government (after



Section of the 'Catalan Way' (human chain) on 11 September 2013 (Credit: Clara Polo, CC-BY-SA-3.0)

another Constitutional ruling) given that the polls indicate that 52 per cent of Catalans support independence. The next step is therefore likely to be that a plebiscite regional election will form a parliament with a separatist majority (and polls also show that the separatist Republican Left Party would win the next election) with a mandate of a unilateral declaration of independence. As I argue below, if this does happen, it might force the European Union to step in to avoid both a political and economic crisis that would spill over to other member states.

So far, the strategy of the Spanish government and, implicitly, most of the political opposition, is to do nothing (or very little) and live on in 'denial of the Catalan question'. The assumption, perhaps foolish, is that at some point independence supporters will give up, worn out by harsh spending cuts, which are far more severe than those which Europe imposes on Spain. Yet, such a strategy can backfire as the economic crisis makes people more aware of regional redistribution. While Catalan solidarity is close to 10 per cent of its income; the poorest region in Spain, Extremadura, manages to afford welfare benefits that Catalans do not enjoy, and reduce tax rates. In the meantime, the 'lock in' position of the central government serves the cause of independence very efficiently.

Should Europe take part?

Traditionally, the European Union has regarded the Catalan conflict as an 'internal affair'. However, this assumes that member states can resolve the conflict peacefully by themselves, and that solutions will not exert external effects on other member states. Yet, there are a few reasons why Europe should change its traditional position, and take a more active role (beyond the legalistic reminder that Catalan independence would require the new state to formally re-apply for accession to the EU).

These include the following: First, unlike in the UK (with regards to Scotland), the potential moderators of the process (the Spanish government and its head of state) are neither trusted, nor believed to be neutral. In addition, the credibility of mainstream political parties as conveyors of change is heavily damaged. The latter can be exemplified with the reaction to the rushed pseudo-federalist proposal of the socialist party (PSOE), which was disregarded in a matter of a few hours by all other parties.

Second, a unilateral declaration of independence would create obvious legal and economic turmoil, with inevitable knock on effects on the euro insofar as the credibility of the Spanish recovery plan would be undermined. Third, the Spanish constitution states explicitly that the military guarantees the 'unity of Spain'. Hence, a unilateral declaration of independence can be a potential risk to the attainment of peace within the territory of the European Union. There have been a handful of members of the military making [threatening comments](#) of an eventual military intervention to appease Catalan aspirations. The number one mission of the European Union would have failed if the latter was allowed to happen.

Last, faced with the abovementioned 'law v democracy' dilemma, Europe as a 'project of political liberalisation' should be expected to "err on the side of democracy" and force Spain to hold a referendum. Possibly, as explained in an [earlier post](#) both unionists and secessionists should explain not so much their position, but what a Spanish or independent Catalonia would look like, and more specifically how the welfare state and the wellbeing of the Catalan people will be affected by each project. The European Union should in turn define what the rules are that govern an implicit 'internal enlargement', to avoid Catalonia becoming the next Switzerland of Southern Europe.

Today, both Spanish and European federalism have to confront the same common problems, namely that federalism requires federalists at the central and regional level. Paradoxically enough, fragmenting non-federal states in Europe can be a strategy for accelerating the formation of a European federation. In any event, it's about time for the European Union to step in.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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About the author

Joan Costa i Font – *LSE European Institute / Department of Social Policy*

Joan Costa i Font is Associate Professor (Reader) in Political Economy at LSE. His main research interest is in political economy (theoretically grounded 'economic and public policy analysis') and applied economics (more specifically in the areas of health and social economics).



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